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THE REAL MEXICAN PROBLEM

BY ROLAND G. USHER

THE vital difficulty in dealing with the present situation in Mexico comes from a confusion of precedents and ethical ideas, from the persistent application of legal precedents and concepts of political thought which the past history of the United States amply proves have never been hitherto applied to the solution of this problem on the many occasions when it has been met and solved. We are not confronted in Mexico with a new problem at all, nor even with a new phase of an old problem. We are not confronted, in fact, with an issue to be decided (if past history is really a criterion) by international ethics or international law. It is a question of internal relations to be solved by the application of the ethics and principles of westward expansion as they have been understood and applied by white men in America since the days when the adventurous Cortés saw the white walls of Mexico gleaming in the distance.

Mexico is not in our sense of the word a nation at all, but a collection, loosely organized, of more or less developed and more or less widely sundered Indian tribes. The census classes about nineteen per cent. of the population as white, though it is notorious that there are few native Mexicans without more or less Indian blood. Of the Indians forty-three per cent. are classed as mixed bloods, meaning rather a mixture of Indian stocks than a distinct crossing with the whites, while thirty-eight per cent. are classed as pure Indians. In the South and West, indeed, are many tribes of Indians almost untouched by association with whites, and not nearly as "civilized" as many tribes on the reservations in the United States. None of these Mexican Indians are to be compared with the Creek and Cherokee nations in Oklahoma. Mexico is, in fact, not a nation, but a country peopled by many tribes of Indians of varying degrees of

development, none reaching what we would call civilization, who have been ruled for centuries by a thin veneer of white men comprising not more than five per cent. of the population. Essentially, the Mexican problem is not an international issue of magnitude, but another phase of the Indian problem we have already met so many times. That inconsiderable proportion of white men must not blind us to the essential facts and allow us to look upon Mexico as a white nation or even as a nation at all.

The actual issue out of which the present crisis grew is simple and as old as the presence of white men in America. These Mexican Indians occupy a territory whose great natural resources they do not and cannot utilize, and which white men covet. The explicit question to be decided, therefore, is that old issue, in what way shall the white men secure possession of what they desire without actually exterminating by force of arms the Indians who oppose them? The precedents furnished by our own past history upon this problem and its previous solutions are clear and without a single exception. Indeed, if truth be told, the real issue confronting us as a nation is our ability or desire to break at this late date this unwavering line of precedent.

Ever since white men have dealt with Indians, they have declined steadfastly, Spaniard and Frenchman, Englishman and American, of all sorts and varieties of opinions, ages, and developments, to recognize that the red man possessed any right to continued possession of the soil which white men felt they could use. While the whites were few in numbers and therefore weak, they were anxious to secure by kindness the Indians' acquiescence in their residence and development of the country. The first step was to obtain by gifts, promises, treaties, permission to occupy and use small tracts of land, which were at the time unoccupied by the Indians. But occupation invariably meant possession. What the whites once secured they never relinquished, and as their numbers grew and they became strong enough to maintain themselves against assault, they asserted their "rights," their "ownership," and justified the claim by their greater strength, their superior ability to utilize the resources of the country, their more considerable economic interest. Peaceful penetration has been the rule in America. By its methods the country has been occupied and the title of the white man established. If its methods were

wrong, if the title of the land obtained by them was invalid, if the process was unethical, no American holds or ever will hold, as Roger Williams assured the General Court of Massachusetts, moral right or legal title to a foot of land in the United States of America. We may possess ourselves of the soil of Mexico and of all that appertains thereto by virtue of the selfsame logic and the identical legal and ethical considerations which always justified to our fathers' consciences their dispossession of the red man in that part of North America called the United States, the home of Liberty, of Freedom, of Justice—for white men. Mexico and Central America, a few scattered reservations in the West, are in fact the only parts of this great continent which the red man still does possess. If it is wrong for us to intervene in Mexico, the history of the United States is the record of a deliberate crime without parallel for magnitude in history. The white men *invaded* North America; they *intervened* constantly and to their own advantage in the affairs of the Indians. They swept the red man from the fields and farms of his ancestors without compunction or regret. Compared to what has already been done on this continent, the occupation of Mexico would be just, conservative, ethical, and praiseworthy. Compared with the methods already used, a conquest of Mexico by modern methods would be mild, judicious, and beneficial to the people. By the ethics of our past history, we cannot commit crime in Mexico. One cannot sin against men whose existence the law does not recognize.

When the Indians understood that occupation by the white man meant more than permission to erect a tent, to hunt a while, to grow a little maize, and then to move to some other site, a new conception entered the minds of those primitive people—the notion of ownership, of permanent possession. That they had given the white men any such rights, Indians like Philip denied with fury. Instantly they rose to resist, to recover the fields by force of which guile was robbing them. One and all they were exterminated by the whites. "Conquest" and "war" was not spoken of. Fighting with savages is not dignified with the names used for the relations of white men. The Indians were not conquered: they were "reduced," "beaten," "defeated." Indians cannot be conquered nor can their territory be invaded. They have no governments which the white man is bound to

recognize. Such has been the history and ethics of the exploration and settlement of the United States.

For many years the English settlers on the Atlantic coast came into contact with minor Indian tribes, so weak in numbers and crude in organization that the ethics of westward expansion did not so greatly belie the facts. As the belt of settlement grew slowly westward, the whites came into contact with regularly constituted Indian states with too numerous a population to be disregarded, with definite "constitutions," "laws," and customs. With them relations were perforce had, "treaties" were perforce signed. But there can be no doubt that neither French, Dutch, nor English ever "recognized" the Iroquois "state" in any proper sense of the word, or assumed that it possessed any legal right to continuance or courtesy such as the white men accorded freely to one another. In their own treaties the whites tacitly granted to one another these very Indians and their land, or, more exactly, granted to one another the land, without any mention or regard of the occupants already on it. Similarly, the charters of the English kings never took any account of the "right" of Indians to a foot of the soil of the immense tracts of land laid out between the Atlantic and Pacific. Indeed, the State of New York, after the Revolution, solemnly argued that its boundaries included the greater part of the territory between the Alleghenies and the Mississippi because the Duke of York's original grant from Charles II. included the lands of the Iroquois. The whites might receive or inherit what they themselves declined to recognize that the Indian had ever owned!

In the Gulf States the whites came into contact with the highly organized and even civilized Indian states of the Cherokees, Creeks, and Choctaws. They tilled the soil, built houses, governed themselves peaceably and well. They were at least as advanced in the arts and methods of civilization, at least as diligent, capable, industrious, peaceable, as are the present Mexicans. If there has been constitutional government in Mexico, then constitutional government existed among the Creeks in 1835, but neither the United States Government nor the State of Georgia "recognized" its existence. Their actual attainments secured neither rights nor consideration; they were Indians. They were not in any way endangering the lives or property of white men in the South; but they possessed valuable lands which the white

men coveted, and there was little hesitation in deciding that they must move. They were occupiers, not possessors; tenants-at-will, not owners. After the shameful breach of solemn treaties, they were at last by promises and threats induced to surrender their lands in Georgia and Alabama, and were allotted others, which the United States solemnly erected into an Indian Territory—a preserve which was to remain theirs forever. When in turn white men wanted those fields, once more the Indians' claims were ignored, the State of Oklahoma was erected, and most of the land not actually occupied by Indians was allotted to white settlers. Indians have no rights which white men are bound to recognize.

Twice already has a variant of this drama been enacted with Mexico. When the present Republic was erected, Spain ceded to that new "state" a vast area including all of the United States west of Louisiana and the Rocky Mountains and south of Oregon. It embraced Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, California, Utah, Nevada, and part of Wyoming and Colorado, as well as the relatively smaller area which still remains in the hands of the Mexicans. The vast possibilities of the cotton culture had just been grasped by the Southern planters; slave labor and virgin soil would yield, they discovered, an enormous profit. Over the Mexican boundary rushed Southern planters and their slaves, and scarcely saying, by your leave to the Mexicans, staked out plantations in the fertile river bottoms and proceeded to cultivate them. The news of the rich find spread rapidly; the number of Americans in Texas doubled and quadrupled; and within a very few years the Americans in Texas were claiming that Texas belonged to them and not to the Mexicans. Were they not more numerous? Were they not cultivating the soil which the Mexicans were too lazy to use? Were they not white men? To this logic the Mexicans objected. That their objection possessed any justice the Texans denied. A brief war was fought, the Mexicans were defeated, and the Republic of Texas was established, owned by Americans, few of whom had seen the new State fifteen years before. Americans had intervened in Mexico and had appropriated a large section of that country, first by peaceful penetration, and then by force of arms. Their logic, ethics, and methods were those of Cortés and Pizarro, of Queen Elizabeth and James I., of John Winthrop and

William Bradford, of the State of New York and the State of Georgia.

The new State now offered itself to the United States, and the Southern States, anxious to bring into the Union so much good cotton land which would otherwise compete with them, free from the restrictions the Federal Constitution imposed upon them, urged the acceptance of the Texans' offer. Finally, fearing that England or France might secure Texas and thus begin a new empire in the West, the United States accepted it. With Texas we annexed a dispute with Mexico over the amount of land "rightfully" the property of the Texans, and the dispute soon developed into a war. After some campaigning the United States forced the Mexicans to make peace, and we demanded not only the cession of the land over which the war was fought, but the whole of Mexico north of the Rio Grande, an empire in extent and resources. Indeed, though we paid a small sum of money to Mexico, and though most of the proprieties were formally observed, the real gist of the transaction impressed the Mexicans not unlike this: Texas robbed Mexico, and, having successfully stolen much, attempted to take a good deal more, insisting that it was really part of the original loot. Then, unable to defend it, it called in the United States to help it. The United States was indignant because the Mexicans had resisted the second theft, and compelled them to give up not only that land, but most of Mexico as well. Thus Americans intervened in Mexico for the second time, and robbed the Indians of more than half their country.

Once more, and, as the Mexicans think, for the last time, the old, old issue reappears. The Indian still holds land the white man covets. Having spread over Texas, California, and the West, the white man has been for the last few decades invading Mexico proper, the Mexican Indians' home land. Already, by a reasonable computation, Americans own the bulk of the realizable wealth in the country; already they are numerous enough to form a distinct proportion of the population that calls itself white. They have built the railroads, dug the mines, cultivated rubber, bananas, coffee. They are making money; Mexico is valuable; it is good for white men; the Mexicans do not value it. Once more goes up the cry for intervention by the United States. The situation is somewhat altered by long diplomatic relationship and formal recognition by the United

States of a Mexican Republic; it is complicated by the fact that the Mexicans cannot even by fiction sell their homeland for money as they did California; public opinion will play a part in this case which it has never played before; but essentially the old claims are before us. Once more we hear that the sort of government the Mexicans claim they have always had is not what is meant in international law by civilized or constitutional government. We insist upon their establishing the sort of government which we consider constitutional, despite their protests that we ask an impossibility. Less than that, we reiterate, the United States cannot recognize. The rights of the five per cent. of white men to continued possession and rule we do not recognize. Their right to continue to "govern" these millions of Indians as they see fit, we deny. That they claim to have a government is nothing; we have several times ignored the claims of better organized states of more highly developed Indians than the Mexicans.

Without venturing in any way to predict dates, methods, or results, does not the present condition of Georgia, Oklahoma, Texas, California, indicate the future of Mexico? Will the westward and southward expansion of the American people, so persistently and relentlessly pursued for three centuries at the expense of the red men, stop now at the Rio Grande? Will humanitarian and ethical considerations save the Indian State of Mexico long from the fate every Indian community on this continent has already experienced? Indeed, there is much ground for insisting that the peaceful penetration of Mexico is at least as much a *fait accompli* at the present writing as was the Republic of Texas in 1844. Whatever temporary arrangement may be made at this time, whatever it is called, whether influence, protection, guidance, or intervention (certainly not conquest), the flood of American immigration will pour over Mexico, swiftly the fifteen millions of Indians will be outnumbered by fifteen and more millions of Americans, and, as in Georgia and in Oklahoma, the white men will steadily but relentlessly push the red man into the hills and deserts and will themselves occupy the land in his stead. Unless the precedents of the past are now to be broken, the Indian problem in Mexico will not be settled by any different considerations than have dictated the treatment of the Indians already in the United States. With what face could we

offer Indians in Mexico rights and privileges, citizenship, and recognition in the courts which we have steadily denied the red men at our own door? Christianity, morality, international law, and ethics have been often invoked in the Indians' defense and as often consistently disregarded. Is it likely that now such importance will be attached to considerations never before of weight as to spare these last red men in the face of tradition, precedent, ignorance, prejudice, and self-interest?

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